

Redeemed

by Michael Donovan

Category: Buffy: The Vampire Slayer

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-11-10 09:00:00

Updated: 1999-11-10 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 12:10:26

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 14,161

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Five months after 'The Wish', a new Slayer arrives in Sunnydale to aid the Whitehats and battles a very different Seventh Son.

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>Author's note: Set five months after 'The Wish', I took a little liberty with the ending of the episode. The character of Gabriel was originally introduced in a previous story I wrote entitled "Divergent Paths".

>* * *

>Rupert Giles sat behind his large mahogany desk, paging through another old book. Things weren't going well for the Whitehats, lately. They hadn't been good ever, really. But lately it had gotten worse. Any normal man would have packed up shop and fled a nightmare town like Sunnydale, but Rupert couldn't do that. He owed it to Oz, Larry, Amy and the others to keep trying. Without him, they would have no leadership at all and the vampires would rule unopposed.

>Five months ago, he had actually convinced the Watcher's council to send him the Slayer. A cold and embittered girl, she had been an impressive fighter. But not impressive enough. She had chosen to face the Master by herself and she might have beaten him. But he had not been alone. His minions had teamed up against her and the Master himself had broken her neck like it was a twig.

>Despite his insistence, the Council refused to send another Slayer to face the Master so soon. So Sunnydale was left to fester in darkness until they deemed the new Slayer to be 'ready'.

>Rupert had taken matters into his own hands after that and paid a call to his younger brother, Peter. Peter's youngest son Gabriel had been born under special circumstances and was gifted with powers that were similar and equal to any Slayer. As the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son, he would have been a great ally against the Master. Both father and son had arrived within days and it had seemed that things were

about to actually take an upward turn for a change.

>Rupert removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly. He didn't even want to remember the disaster that had resulted from that plan. It had been a harsh reminder that he had not become as accustomed to loss as he had thought.

>If only the Council would get off their backsides and open their eyes to the threat the Master posed. Maybe then they would send the new Slayer and he and his people might actually stand a chance in this war. Lately, though, they weren't even taking his calls. But after what had happened to his nephew, he wasn't even sure he could blame them. Turning another page, he continued to scan through the old tome in his hands in search of some glimmer of hope.

>* * *

>Gabriel rolled off the cold, naked body of the female vampire under him feeling drained and empty. They were all cold, no comfort at all to hold or lay next to. She smiled and reached for him playfully as he folded his hands behind his head and stared up at the black-painted skylight. Annoyed, he slapped her hands away with far more force than was necessary and slipped his legs out from under the black sheets, slinging them over the edge of the bed and putting his back to her. The girl recoiled, hurt, cradling her hand against her chest.

>Narrowing his gold-on-green eyes darkly, he pulled on a pair of loose, black pants and tied the drawstring at his waist. The sex had been unsatisfying, at best. The girl was pretty enough, prettier than many of the vampire women he bedded, but she was empty and soulless, like all her kind. Instead of filling him with emotion, she had chilled the few shreds of life he still had left. He needed something more.

>"Get out." He growled at her, his voice low and gravelly as he rose to his feet.

>He walked across his expansive studio apartment, over to a sturdy desk and pulled open the top drawer, not even bothering to look as the vampire girl hurried out of the room with her clothes gathered in her arms. She hadn't even taken the time to get dressed. The Seventh Son had been known to stake his vampire lovers if they did not get away fast enough after he was finished with them.

>Gabriel pulled a length of rubber tubing, a syringe and a small bottle of black liquid out of the drawer and set them side by side on the desktop. It had become a ritual, this consistent poisoning of his body, like religion. Better even. Wrapping the tubing tightly just above his left biceps, he tapped his forearm a few times to swell a good-sized vein before inserting the tip of the needle into the bottle and drawing the syringe half-full. He flicked the needle a few times to remove any possible air bubbles and traced it slowly across a line of faint pink marks on his arm. The insides of both his forearms were dotted with dozens of similar track marks.

>The needle slid smoothly into his vein with practiced precision and he squeezed the entire dose into his bloodstream with a deep moan. The refined liquid was so much better than the pills his father used to give him. It actually made life worth living.

>Feeling the drug begin to course through him, he dropped his equipment back into the drawer and slammed it shut. He pulled a tight, charcoal gray t-shirt over his head and frowned at it slightly. Everything in this place was either black or charcoal. Vampires were famous for their love of morose and depressing colors. It was like they couldn't bear to witness a vibrancy that could never exist within the void inside themselves. But it didn't matter to Gabriel anymore. He felt energized again, alive for the duration of the dose. With his addiction dealt with, the injection began to

reawaken his other cravings.

>Confidently, he sauntered down the spiral, metal stairway to the main level. The building had once been a dance club for teens, he had been told, but, other than himself, a living human had not voluntarily set foot inside for months.

>As he reached the last step, he smiled lustily when he found a familiar figure looking out the window and waiting with her back to him. The girl was dressed all in black leather with her long auburn hair hanging loosely down her back. She was small too, the top of her head barely reached the middle of his chest. Gabriel liked his women small.

>Slithering up from behind, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed the front of his body lewdly against her.

>The girl leaned into him, grinding her lower back into his crotch.

>"Mmmmm, Xander." She purred, sliding around to face him, her eyes half closed.

>Gabriel snickered and groped her breasts blatantly. The girl's eyes widened and she shoved him back with a deep snarl.

>"Get your filthy hands off me, Warmblood!" She warned, her face twisted into an animalistic mask.

>"Oh, come on, Willow." Gabriel smirked, grabbing himself, "You know you want it."

>Willow tilted her head and strolled up to him slowly, considering.

>"The Master won't let me kill you, won't even let me bite you." She lamented with a sigh, stroking a sharp fingernail along the edge of his jaw.

>Of course he wouldn't. Gabriel was the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. If he somehow became a vampire, he would be transformed into a master vampire as well, a match for their common lord. The Master would never tolerate that.

>Drawing her finger down his neck and across his chest, Willow turned away from him toward the doorway. She rotated her neck slowly to the side and yawned exaggeratedly, "Bored now."

>Gabriel's face darkened angrily, "You didn't mind the last time."

>"Chalk it up to the curiosity of a first time experience." She sighed patronizingly, "Trust me, it wasn't very memorable."

>"You always were a cold little bitch." He growled.

>A second vampire, a dark-haired male, entered through the doorway, wearing a white t-shirt and a black leather jacket. His lip curled when he saw Gabriel. Willow slipped her arms around the young vampire's waist and nuzzled into his neck affectionately.

>"What's he doing here?" he jerked his head disdainfully in Gabriel's direction. "Oh, it's nothing, Xander." She mumbled into his chest, stroking her fingertips across his shoulders and back, "The warmblood was just hoping to show me that he has no idea how to satisfy a woman."

>Xander sneered and Gabriel glared hatefully at her.

>"Out of my way." The Seventh Son snapped, heading for the door.

>Xander stood his ground and the two men matched stares, Xander in full vampiric face. Gabriel's green eyes narrowed dangerously and Xander faltered, stepping back with Willow in his arms.

>"Yeah, you'd BETTER move." Gabriel bared his teeth and shoved the door wide, stalking outside.

>Xander's yellow eyes followed him as he left, filled with hate, until Willow took him by the jaw and turned him around into a deep kiss.

>"Disgusting warmblood." She chuckled, tracing Xander's lips with the tip of her tongue.

>Xander smiled darkly and met her kiss.

>* * *

>Gabriel stormed down the stairs into the basement. Down here, at least, he could be away from the undead for a while. He came to a cold, metal cell. Or most of them, anyway, Gabriel reconsidered, looking to the silent, unmoving prisoner shackled inside.

>Slipping a key out of his pocket, he unlocked the cell door and stepped inside, snapping on the single, overhead light bulb.

>"Sit up." He slapped the prisoner sharply across the face.

>The prisoner looked up slowly and strained against the chains around his wrists, his dark eyes tortured and haunted.

>"What do you want?" the vampire asked in a raspy voice, squinting against the harsh light.

>"I need someone to vent my anger on." Gabriel hauled him to his feet and leaned him back against the wall, "And you, my friend, have just volunteered."

>"Why are you doing this?" the vampire's body sagged tiredly, his shirt hanging open and exposing angry red burns marring his chest, "I've never done anything to hurt you."

>Gabriel considered the burns curiously, "No one said this was personal, but why should Willow be the only one who gets to play with the Puppy."

>"My name is Angel." The vampire grunted, bristling.

>"Okay then, Angel. You need an explanation?" The Seventh Son drove his fist into the prisoner's stomach, doubling him over in pain, "Vampires piss me off. You're a vampire. Simple as that."

>Gabriel backhanded the vampire hard enough to drive him back to his knees, his hands dangling from his manacles overhead.

>"Besides," the Seventh Son continued, rubbing unconsciously at the inside of his left elbow, "If I knock out Xander's teeth again, the Master will cut off my supply."

>Angel's eyes narrowed knowingly, "You hate them, don't you?"

>"Of course." Gabriel straightened Angel's body out and slammed him back against the hard, stone wall, "They're empty, soulless things. Why shouldn't I hate them?"

>"You're just as bad as they are." Angel fixed him with a steady glare, "Worse even. Because you have a choice."

>Gabriel's eyes widened in shock for a moment then narrowed hatefully. With a snarl, he slammed his fist into Angel's stomach again.

>* * *

>Oz and Larry entered the library with Amy close behind.

>"Hey, Chief, how's it going?" Larry queried, casually walking up to Giles' desk.

>"Not good, I'm afraid." Giles raised his head out of another book and sighed, "So far, any spells even remotely useful that I've found are just too far beyond Amy's ability to cast." He turned his gaze to the blonde girl apologetically, "Meaning no disrespect to your

prowess as a witch, of course."

>"None taken." she shrugged, "I checked all my mother's old books and couldn't find anything worthwhile, either. After you guys cast her out of my body, I think she tripped a failsafe that destroyed all her really powerful magic."

>Oz sat on the edge of the desk, "So where does that leave us?"

>"I was able to do a seeing and find out something that might be a little useful." Amy nodded, "Looks like the Master is planning an all-you-can-eat outing to the sixth street homeless shelter."

>"How does THAT help us?" Oz frowned.

>Amy smirked to herself. She always thought he looked kind of cute when he did that.

>"I'll tell you how it helps." An unfamiliar female voice sounded from the direction of the door, "It gives us the chance to plan an ambush."

>A tall, dark-haired girl strode in through the double swinging doors wearing a tight leather jacket and carrying a navy blue kit bag over her shoulder. Under the open jacket, she was dressed in a midriff-baring black top and tight, leather pants that hugged her generous curves snugly.

>Giles leapt to his feet as the girl approached, "Who are you?"

>"Name's Faith." She offered her hand across the desk to him, "Watcher's council sent me to take care of your vampire problem."

>"Y-You're the new Slayer?" Giles shook her hand gingerly, "But the Council. They said you weren't ready."

>"Hmm, guess they changed their minds." She raised a dark eyebrow and smirked, "So let's get down to business. We have an attack to plan?"

>Dumping her kit bag on the desk, she opened it to reveal a vast array of weapons ranging from carved wooden stakes and holy water to crossbows and swords.

>* * *

>The Master leaned forward in his throne and stretched. Before him, his three most prized servants knelt subserviently on the gray tiled floor.

>"I have news, my children." He hissed gleefully, "We have a new visitor in town."

>"Really?" Willow smiled and licked her canines, "is it someone tasty?"

>The Master beckoned with a languid hand and a rotted, gray-fleshed zombie shuffled over to his side. The creature's face was putrefied and part of its skull was cracked open, exposing, gray-green, rotted brains within.

>"My spy here spotted her early this afternoon," the red-mouthed vampire dipped the tip of his pinky finger into the crevice in the zombie's skull and touched it experimentally to his tongue with a sour face, "but due to his advanced condition, I can't be sure of her identity."

>The vampire chuckled and looked Gabriel over slowly. The young man met his gaze coldly.

>"You really should have been more careful when you murdered dear old Dad, Gabriel. He might have lasted longer that way. We were lucky to get the formula for your medicine before his brain atrophied too much. You can only squeeze so much information from a zombie's brain before it pops." The Master shrugged unconcerned, "Oh, well. Water under the bridge. At least our Mister Wilkins is in better shape. I

still have much to draw out of his mind."

>He indicated a second zombie who stood, silent and unmoving, against the wall. Unlike Gabriel's father, this one might almost have passed for human if it weren't for the fish-belly pallor of its flesh and the blank, glassy look in its eyes.

>"So what's the big deal about a new girl in town?" Xander cocked his head, "Sounds like just another meal for our plates to me."

>"Hmm, one would think." The Master patted his servant patiently on the top of his head, "but I believe our new arrival may be the Slayer."

>"But you killed her five months ago." Xander looked confused, "I don't understand."

>"You don't have to." Their lord sighed, "All you have to do is make sure this new girl is dead by sunrise." He looked down at Gabriel and smiled congenially, "I want Gabriel to lead this attack."

>All three of his servants stared in shock.

>"What?" Xander blurted, "He's a warmblood! I'm not taking orders from him!"

>
Gabriel glared at him, his lip curled and his fist clenched threateningly. "You WILL." The Master informed the young vampire with deadly calm, "Because I command it. There are certain advantages he has which we may put to use. The Slayer's death is our first priority."

>
"How do we know where to find her?" Willow grinned at Xander, entwining her fingers with his, "I'd love to taste a Slayer."

>
"Clean out the homeless shelter like we planned." The Master instructed, "She'll show up. And a reward to whoever kills her."

>
The three vampires chuckled darkly to one another as Gabriel rose to his feet and slunk out of the room, rubbing viciously at the inside of his left elbow.

>
* * *

>
Giles watched as the new Slayer paced back and forth in the entryway of the shelter, a shining sword balanced over her shoulder.

>
"All the entrance signs have been taken down and the people have all been evacuated to the school gym." He informed her, "Larry and Oz should be back any minute now."

>
"No rush." Faith continued to pace, circling up closer to him, "If these vamps are as bad as you say they are, I want them all to myself. I just hope this is the right place."

>
"It is." Amy told her from her position in the corner, "I'm sure of it."

>
Faith jabbed the tip of her sword into the floor irritably, "Then I wish they'd hurry it up and get here. I'm tired of waiting around."

>
"Patience, Faith, please." Giles cautioned, "Going off half-cocked was what got your predecessor killed."

>
"Yeah, well, I'm not her" the Slayer rolled her eyes, "and I'm about to go crazy from all this suspense."

>
The shelter's front door opened and a tall, auburn-haired young man walked in, smiling ironically. Outside, two vampires, a male and a female, hovered expectantly just outside the doorway, awaiting invitation.

>
"You should listen to him." Gabriel advised, eyeing the Watcher, "He knows what he's talking about. Hello, Uncle."

>
"How did he - ?" Faith stared, confused, then her dark eyes filled with understanding, "He's not a vampire."

>
Giles nodded gravely as his nephew looked over the new Slayer with interest.

>
"Hmm, new Slayer, huh? Nice." he commented with a leer, "I had a dream once where I loved a Slayer. A few of them, actually."

>
He reached out and stroked the side of her neck with casual ease. Where they touched, both experienced a sharp, prickling heat, like hot needles brushing the skin.

>
"Dream on." Faith slapped his hand away irritably and backed up, holding her neck and brandishing her sword in his direction with her other hand.

>
Gabriel turned and smiled to his companions, "Come on in, guys. There's room for everyone here."

>
Willow and Xander leered evilly and stepped inside with the grace and deadliness of cobras.

>
Giles sat up, his eyes wide, "How?"

>
"Confused?" Gabriel chuckled, "Don't be. This building now belongs to me. The Mayor was kind enough to sell it to me for a dollar. Pretty sweet deal, huh?"

>
A side door burst open and Larry and Oz rushed inside.

>
"Are we late? Did we miss anything?" Larry asked quickly, breathing heavily with exertion

>
Both paused and Oz raised an eyebrow, eyeing the two vampires, "Guess so."

>
Gabriel frowned in their direction then turned his attention back to Faith, looking her up and down.

>
"What do you say, Slayer?" the Seventh Son grinned, "You and me. One on one."

>
"You can't seriously want to fight me." She raised her eyebrows incredulously, levelling the tip of her sword at his chest.

>
"That wasn't exactly what I meant." He shrugged, "But it'll do, I guess."

>
Lashing out with a strong left hand, he swept the blade out of her grasp and lunged forward with his right. Faith caught the blow full on the jaw and stumbled back, whirling into a spinning heel kick. Gabriel blocked the blow and countered with a kick of his own. Faith hopped over the attack neatly and landed near him, snapping a short backfist into his face.

>
The Seventh Son staggered back. Grinning, he ran his tongue across the edge of his lip, tasting blood. This Slayer was good. Very good. He was going to enjoy beating her face in.

>
Xander dove at Amy and she threw her hands in front of her, blasting his eyes with a spell of blinding light. He screamed, clapping his hands to his face, and fell back. Willow snarled and slapped the witch across the face, slamming her against the wall. Larry and Oz tackled the vampire girl, and bore her to the ground, stakes in their hands.

>
Eyes shut and snarling savagely, Xander pulled Larry off her by the scruff of the neck, stuffing a fist into his stomach and jerking his body in close.

>
"Larry!" Oz struggled against Willow's supernatural strength and tossed the young man a wooden cross.

>
Larry caught the cross and jammed it against Xander's cheek. The vampire screamed again, releasing his grip and throwing Larry aside, smoke rising from his skin.

>
"Xander!" Willow smashed the back of Oz's head off the floor and ran to her lover's aid.

>
Amy crouched by Oz's side and helped him up, while Larry moved

to put them behind the protection of his cross. Enraged, the two vampires stalked a quiet, predatory circle around them with murder in their eyes.

>
"This doesn't look good." Amy whispered worriedly.

>
Faith launched herself at Gabriel, fists leading. He spun and turned with her, expertly keeping her hands from making contact. Growling, she head butted him in the chest and lunged with a sharp kick to his midsection. Gabriel threw the kick aside and smashed a hard fist into her throat. Faith hit the floor, choking. If she hadn't turned at the last second, the blow might have crushed her windpipe.

>
Gabriel cracked the toe of his boot into her spine and drove her face first to the floor. Rolling her body over, he climbed on top of her and straddled her waist, pinning her arms under his legs.

>
Faith twisted under him, struggling to get free. She could feel the hot needling sensation again, like a field of force generated between them.

>
"Get off me!" she snarled, glaring balefully up at him.

>
"Now this is almost just how I wanted you, Slayer." He sneered, pressing the palms of his hands against her firm breasts, "But I was told to kill you and I guess that's how it'll have to be. Sorry." His hands shifted to her throat and he sat up, squeezing down on her windpipe.

>
"Get your hands off her." Giles commanded threateningly, leveling a powerful, loaded crossbow at his nephew.

>
Gabriel released his grip and held his hands up in mock fear. Faith coughed underneath him and drew in a sharp, much needed breath. Off to the side, Xander had Oz and Amy pinned to the wall by their necks, Larry's cross broken at his feet. Beside him, Willow knelt next to Larry with her hands tight against his throat, his groggy, bruised face pressed cheek-to-cheek with hers.

>
"You won't pull that trigger." Gabriel smirked confidently, "I'm no vampire. Do you really want my death on your conscience?"

>
"I don't have to kill you." Giles nodded meaningfully, lowering the crossbow and pointing at his crotch, "Tell the vampires to let them go."

>
"I doubt that you'd risk hitting your new Slayer." The Seventh Son's smirk deepened, "but I'm not in the mood to be taking chances." He turned his head toward Xander and Willow, "Let them go."

>
Willow released a defiant, lion-like snarl and bared her teeth at him, pressing the tips of her fingers into Larry's soft throat. Xander hesitated, looking between the faces of Gabriel and his lover.

>
"I said, let them go!" Gabriel barked.

>
With a petulant sigh, Willow shoved Larry's head away and bounced to her feet, stalking over to Xander as he released his hold on the other two. The pair slid to the floor, coughing weakly. The vampires sauntered together toward the door, their lips curled in anger and their yellow eyes fixed on Gabriel.

>
The auburn-haired young man snapped the heel of his palm into Faith's chin and hopped up off the stunned girl, backing away and watching his uncle cautiously. "Another time, maybe? I'll definitely be seeing YOU again, Slayer. Count on it."

>
Turning swiftly, he bolted for the door, following his cohorts. Giles breathed a heavy sigh and allowed the crossbow to sag to the floor. As Oz and Amy tended to Larry, he crouched next to Faith and

helped her into a sitting position. There was blood running from her nose and she looked a little dazed, but otherwise, she appeared to be all right.

>
Shaking her head to clear it, she used Giles' arm to pull herself to her feet, "Who was that guy?"

>
* * *

>
"Allow me to see if I understand this correctly." The Master chopped his hand through the air with deliberate control, "You had the Slayer's life in your hands and you let her slip through your fingers!"

>
The feral looking vampire snarled violently and snagged Gabriel by the throat, pulling him in close to his throne. Willow ceased her fussing over the burn on Xander's cheek and curled against his chest, stifling a snicker, as the young vampire looked over the top of her head with cruel mirth in his eyes.

>
"The old man had a crossbow on me." Gabriel spat, prying the Master's hand open and stepping back, "I wasn't about to just let him shoot me."

>
"I don't care if you live or die." The Master hissed angrily, "The prophecy says that I will be destroyed by a Slayer! She must be killed, no matter what the cost! Fail me again and it will be your head."

>
"Yeah, whatever, Pinkface." The Seventh Son glared at him, "You won't kill me. You need me."

>
"And, might I remind you, you need this." The Master held a small, black vial teasingly between thumb and forefinger.

>
Gabriel fell silent and became instantly subdued, a burning itch rising in the crooks of his elbows.

>
"Good." The Master smirked, "I'm glad you realize who is in control here."

>
One of the Master's vampire lackeys entered the room holding a drowsy human captive in his hands. The girl was young, in her late teens probably, with soft blonde hair and wide, fear-filled blue eyes. In her arms, she clutched a wailing infant protectively against her chest.

>
"Feeding tiiiime!" Willow cooed excitedly, slipping her hands out from under Xander's shirt.

>
"P-Please, my baby." The girl pleaded to Gabriel, "Don't let them hurt my baby!"

>
The Seventh Son stared at her, motionless and blank-faced, as the lackey pried the baby out of her hands and she cried out, reaching for it. Willow seized the girl's wrist and jerked her into her grip.

>
"Looks like Xander and I will have to share this one." She giggled as the baby was placed in the Master's arms.

>
Xander pressed himself against the girl's back and wrapped his arms around Willow, trapping the captive girl between them.

>
"You're pretty. I'm thinking unwed mother, hmm?" Xander breathed into her ear then leered over his shoulder at the Master, "Maybe we should change her and give Gabriel a new play toy."

>
The girl trembled in terror, her glistening eyes widening even further.

>
The Master chuckled darkly, fondling the crying baby's head until it calmed, "He's right, Gabriel. She is an attractive little thing. How would you like another cold body for your bed? You like them cold, don't you?"

>
Gabriel glared at the three vampires as the room filled with their biting laughter.

>
"Okay, we've all had our fun. You may leave now, Gabriel." The Master waved his hand dismissively, "I think you understand my disappointment in you. I assume you won't let it happen again." He paused and held the quieted infant out in his hands with a bloodthirsty sneer, "Unless you're in the mood for a bite yourself?"

>
Gabriel made a face and turned for the door, "No. Thanks. I'll pass."

>
"Suit yourself." Willow called teasingly as she scraped her teeth up the captive girl's throat and followed with her tongue. A ripple of cruel chuckles ran through the three vampires as Gabriel fled the scene and slammed the door shut behind him.

>
* * *

>
Angel hung limply from his chains. It didn't matter what position he got himself into, they were all equally uncomfortable. A long burn mark scored the right side of his cheek and fresh pits had been seared into his chest. Willow had been down to visit him again recently and the meeting had left him weak and sore. Every movement brought on fresh pain.

>
The door to the basement opened and someone entered the prison chamber. As always, Angel remained silent and still.

>
Pulling over a worn, wooden chair, the visitor sat himself down opposite the imprisoned vampire and withdrew a small, metal box from his pocket. Opening it up, he took out a length of rubber tubing, a syringe and a vial filled with black liquid. He repeated his ritual with mechanical efficiency and replaced everything back in the box. The dose was meant to steady him, help him forget what he had just witnessed upstairs. But something else was bothering him more.

>
Slipping the metal box back into his pocket, he leaned back in his chair and kicked the hard heel of his boot against the metal cage, creating a violent clatter.

>
Angel stirred and raised his head slowly, wincing.

>
"In the mood to beat a bound prisoner again?" he spat angrily.

>
Gabriel shook his head, "No. I have . . . questions."

>
"Questions?" the vampire's eyes narrowed, "What kind of questions would I be able to answer for you?"

>
"Do you know what the Second Sight is?" Gabriel regarded him seriously.

>
Angel nodded. According to the legends, certain individuals were gifted with a sixth sense, a power to see beyond what their eyes showed them. It was called the Second Sight and it was well known within the ranks of the Master's camp that Gabriel was one of those individuals.

>
"It must be hard." Angel's voice rasped, "Surrounded by evil all the time, seeing just how deep it goes?"

>
"It's no treat." Gabriel agreed, "But you're different. When I look at you, I see something else. You have a soul."

>
"That's why they keep me locked up down here." The vampire nodded softly, "They know I can feel pain and loss. They enjoy exploiting that."

>
"Something happened tonight." Gabriel's lips tightened in troubled thought, "I fought the new Slayer and something inside me . . . changed."

>
Angel looked at the Seventh Son with guarded interest, "What?"

>
Gabriel rose sharply to his feet and began to pace.

>
"When I touched her, there was this strange feeling, like energy between us." His eyes were clouded with the memory, "I've never felt anything like it before in my life."
>
"My guess is that you haven't felt much of anything in a long time." Angel noted wisely.
>
"Everything I touch, everything I see, it's all so cold and empty." The Seventh Son held tightly to the bars and crouched so that he was eye-to-eye with Angel, his face filled with confusion and uncertainty, "But not her. She's full of fire and life, I could feel it from her. It called to something in me. Why is that?"

>
Angel tilted his head and scrutinized the young man before him shrewdly.

>
"Maybe you have a soul after all." He whispered.

>
* * *

>
Giles dampened the corner of a cloth with cool water and attempted to dab at Faith's bruised temple with it.

>
"Will you quit with the Florence Nightingale routine?" she snapped irritably and rose to her feet, pacing tensely.

>
Amy looked up from bandaging the minor cuts on Larry's face and neck and shrugged at the Watcher. The new Slayer was good, but like her predecessor, she wasn't much of a team player. It seemed like every second she spent with them in the confines of the Sunnydale school library, the room got a little bit smaller.

>
"Don't be so upset, Faith." Giles counceled, folding up the cloth and putting it in a pile with a number of others, "We managed to save the people from the shelter. That's the important part."

>
"No. It's not." The dark-haired girl clenched her fist angrily, "I let that guy walk all over me. He even copped a feel! The next time I see him, human or not, I'm taking him out."

>
Giles sighed, "Gabriel is the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. His power is equal to a Slayer's and he has become . . . enhanced."

>
"You mean he's a basehead." Her lips turned bitterly, "Did you get a look at his arms? Pincushions don't have that many holes in them."

>
"Gabriel's addiction is not his fault." Giles frowned with remembered pain, "But it has gone beyond the point where it can be reversed."

>
"Doesn't matter." Faith grumbled, "As soon as I find him again, he's dead."

>
"Maybe there's a way to take him out without killing him." Amy suggested, putting the last strip of medical tape on Larry's face, "I think he likes you. What if we used that against him?"

>
"Screw that." Faith folded her arms tightly across her chest and scowled, "The guy makes me sick."

>
"I don't know." Amy considered, "Under other circumstances, I think he could be kind of cute."

>
"Then you don't see what I see." Faith shook her head, "He's a sellout. What kind of self-respecting human would voluntarily work for vampires?"

>
"P-Perhaps it's worth a try." Giles said softly.

>
"What?!" Faith whirled and eyed him with disgust.

>
"He's not just anyone, Faith." Giles tried his best to look her in the eye, but couldn't, "He's my nephew. It's my fault that he came to Sunnydale. All I'm asking is that you try."

>
Faith's scowl deepened and her lips tightened as she considered the man's heartfelt request.

>
"Fine." She relented at last, "I'll try it once. But I call the shots and if it doesn't work, then I'm going to stake him just like any vamp, got it?".
>
"Thank you, Faith." Giles raised his head and smiled weakly.

>
* * *

>
Faith waited for almost three hours the next day, walking around in plain sight near the old club where the Master had his lair. She would have just as soon gone in and staked him in his coffin, if he had one, but Giles had specifically forbidden her to attack. She had never been big on following rules, but deep down, she knew he had a point. It was just that this plan of theirs was so stupid. She would have preferred ANYTHING to letting Giles' sicko nephew paw her again. But the old guy had sounded so fragile when he had asked her. For some reason, she wanted to fix that if she could.

>
A faint sensation like the prickling of a hundred hot needles crawled up her back. It was him, she knew.

>
"What took you so long?" she asked confidently, turning slowly to face him.

>
He was dressed all in black, jacket, shirt, pants and shoes, standing with his hands in his pockets and watching her carefully.

>
"You've been out here a long time." He observed casually, "Selling yourself on the corner? Or were you waiting for me?"

>
"Aren't you a genius." she snorted with a smirk, turning and strolling slowly away from him, down the street.

>
He moved quickly to catch up with her, "The question is, why?"

>
"I wanted to see you again." She began her ruse with a non-committal shrug.

>
Gabriel's gold and green eyes narrowed suspiciously, "Why?"

>
"I thought you might tell me how someone with as much potential as you could end up as a boot-licking vamp lover." She cocked her head and smiled as sweetly as she could. The look of outrage on his face was almost enough to make her laugh.

>
"That's not how it is!" he snapped, "I have my reasons."

>
"Yeah, I know." She smirked, "I saw them up and down your arms. Being a junkie's no excuse."

>
"Is this what you came for?" he demanded angrily, "To lecture me?!"

>
Faith forced her face and posture to soften a little. She had almost forgotten what she was supposed to be doing.

>
"No." she said, slowing and reaching out to draw her fingertips down the front of his jacket, "No. I just get like this sometimes. I'm not that good at making friends. I think you know what I mean."

>
"Yeah, I know." he flinched a little at her touch and watched her fingers nervously, "That's not what this is all about, is it? Friendship?" He hardly sounded convinced, but he made no move to retreat.

>
"Maybe." She stretched and unzipped the front of her jacket, exposing a length of flat, taugt stomach and a generous display of cleavage. Even for her, the top was a bit risque, but she couldn't afford to pull any punches, "But I got the impression that you might be interested in more."

>
His expression hardened and he glared at her coldly.

>
"You want to buy me." He accused, shaking his head, "You may be hot, Slayer, but you're not too bright. I kicked your ass last night and now you expect me to believe that you got turned on by the experience."

>
Okay, so he wasn't the type to be totally blinded by a little skin. But she hadn't expected him to fall for the first punch anyway.

>
"Let's just say I'm curious." She met his gold on green eyes with her own dark brown ones, "Being the Slayer can be tough. Always having to jump whenever the Watcher's Council calls. Not my idea of an ideal occupation. I figure you and I have a lot in common."

>
"You're kidding me, right?" he arched a dubious eyebrow at her.

>
"We're both fighters," she explained, "neither one of us appears to be big on authority," Now, time to deliver the kicker. She looked softly up into his eyes and inched close enough that the fronts of their bodies were almost touching, "And we're both lonely."

>
Men always seemed to fall for the old 'I'm helpless and lonely' routine. The Seventh Son turned out to be no different. But instead of turning into putty in her hands as she had expected, he tightened up again.

>
"What makes you think I'm lonely?" he questioned, turning sharply away from her.

>
"Come on, you live with vampires." She grasped his shoulder and turned him back to face her, "Not much love and support there, I'm guessing."

>
"So why me?" he looked into her eyes with a strange intensity, "You don't look like the kind of girl who's hard up for a date."

>
"I'm not." She smirked, laying her hand over his. Less than ten hours ago, that hand had been wrapped around her throat in a killing grip, "I just think you could be doing a lot better than what you are."

>
"You want me to switch sides, is that it?" he frowned in confusion.

>
"I don't want anything from you." She lied smoothly, "I just think you should know that you have choices other than the one you've chosen."

>
"Choices, huh?" he smirked to himself, "People keep reminding me of that lately."

>
"Maybe you should start listening." She suggested, stepping back from him.

>
"Wait." He grabbed her by the wrist, "I don't even know your name."

>
"It's Faith." She tugged on her arm in an attempt to retrieve it. This guy was a little too grabby for her tastes.

>
"Before you go Faith." He eased her in closer to him, "Can I have a kiss?"

>
Faith almost decked him right then and there, but managed to control herself. Who did this guy think he was? Stay in character Faith, she reminded herself silently, save yourself the trouble of cracking this guy's head open and painting the sidewalk with his brains.

>
"I guess one kiss won't hurt." She rested her hands palm down on his shoulders while he reached around her waist. She fully expected him to go for another cheap feel and wanted to be ready to stop him. Her whole body tensed nervously as he closed his eyes and leaned into her.

>
To her surprise, his lips met hers with soft caution and tender curiosity instead of the consuming forcefulness she had expected. It was almost sweet the way he touched her mouth with his, all nervous and careful, like a little boy might. He didn't even try to use his tongue. But she still couldn't wait until it was over.
>
He released her and stepped back with a little smile.

>
"That was . . . unexpected." she said, touching her fingertips to her lips.
>
"I'll think about what you said." He told her, backing away with slow, deliberate steps, "And maybe the next time we meet, I can have another kiss?"
>
"Maybe." She nodded, waving and heading back toward her motel.

>
* * *
>
Xander paced back and forth across the floor, rubbing his fingers over the puckered flesh of his cheek. The Master leaned against a desk, thumbing through the pages of an old book, absorbed in the writings, while Willow watched Xander's movements impatiently.

>
"Stop picking." She warned him, "You'll leave a scar."

>
"Damn Whitehats!" the young vampire snarled, forcing his hand down to his side, "I can't wait until nightfall. I'm going to kill that little bastard!"
>
Willow pulled him down to sit next to her and slapped his hand as it strayed to the mark on his cheek again.
>
"Patience, Xander. Stay focused. Remember the Slayer." The Master raised a cautionary hand, his attention still absorbed in his book, "He'll die. Just like all the others. But we must target the Slayer first and foremost."
>
The old vampire cocked his head and looked around.

>
"Where's Gabriel?" he asked, frowning.
>
"Downstairs." Willow rolled her eyes and stretched out, laying her head and shoulders across Xander's lap, "He's playing with the Puppy."
>
"Hmm, he's been spending too much time down there lately." The Master considered, "Bring him up. You're going after the Slayer as soon as the sun goes down."
>
"Sure thing." Willow smirked.
>
Rolling out of Xander's embrace, she hopped to her feet and strolled toward the stairs, trailing her lover behind her by two small fingers.

>
* * *
>
"What do you think this means?" Gabriel asked, his arms crossed tensely over his chest.
>
He had come straight down to the basement not long ago, distraught and confused. Angel had been there, as always. After their last meeting, the captive vampire had been expecting him. Somehow, Gabriel seemed to gain comfort from talking to him. Perhaps he could use that to shift the balance of power away from the Master. Even as a prisoner, he might be able to help the Whitehats this way.

>
"I think it means that you're starting to remember what it's like to be human again." The vampire answered, shifting himself into the most comfortable position he could considering the chains.

>
"Everything was so much easier before." Gabriel lamented, rubbing at the inside of his elbow reflexively, "Now there are so

many questions."

>
"The questions have always been there." Angel smirked, "You just couldn't see them until now."

>
Gabriel sank to the floor tiredly, "I looked at her, Angel. With the Sight."

>
"And what did you see?" Angel watched the young man intently.

>
Gabriel had committed some terrible acts over the last few months, but deep down, he was starting to show signs of change. Angel wondered if he might have the strength to turn his life around after everything that he'd done. Redemption was never easy.

>
"It was amazing. I've never seen this kind of aura from a human before." Gabriel whispered, in awe, "Maybe it was her Slayer power, but it was so beautiful, so strong. Everything around here is so dead." He paused and looked up at the shackled vampire, "No offense."

>
"I'm amazed that you even felt the need to apologize." Angel smirked sardonically, "It's been a while since you've touched a living woman, hasn't it?"

>
"What do YOU know?" Gabriel snapped, pulling his knees up to his chest and hugging them tightly. He was starting to get irritable, Angel could see. He would need another injection soon. But the vampire took his surly attitude in stride.

>
"I know what it's like to be in love with a Slayer." He whispered, his eyes going distant and filling with longing and loss.

>
"Oh, don't start on that again." Gabriel groaned, shaking his head, "I wasn't even around here when she was killed. Not that I would have done anything to stop it, anyway. Besides, who said I was in love with her."

>
"No one." The bound vampire shrugged, sending a soft rattle through his chains, "I'm just going by what you're telling me."

>
"But how - " Gabriel's next question was cut short as the basement door creaked open and Willow and Xander appeared in the doorway.

>
"Playtime's over." Willow informed Gabriel curtly, "We've got some killing to do."

>
"Yeah," Xander sneered, "You and your boyfriend will have plenty of time together later. After we kill the Slayer. I wonder if he'll cry over this one too."

>
Gabriel rose slowly, glaring at the two vampires, and ignored Angel completely.

>
"I have to stop by my apartment first." He said, digging his hands deeply into his pockets, "Then we can go."

>
He pushed past them and took the stairs. Willow poked her head inside and waved to Angel.

>
"We'll be back later, Puppy." She grinned, "Then you and I can have some time of our own together."

>
Angel's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Willow waved again and snaked her arm around Xander's waist walking upstairs with him.

>
* * *

>
Faith rubbed her damp, dark hair with a towel and flicked on the television with her toe, flopping back on her bed. A scented candle burned next to a freshly opened bottle of whiskey on the nightstand, filling the room with a relaxing aroma. She tipped back a shallow swig of whiskey and replaced the bottle on the nightstand. It felt good to get into a comfortable pair of shorts and a tank top. She liked to flaunt the goods as much as or more than the next girl but

there was a fine line between showing a bit of provocative skin and hanging out all over the place.

>
There was a faint knock at her door and she hopped up to answer it. Gabriel wouldn't have followed her back, would he? Just in case, she hefted a solid rock that normally served as her doorstop before turning the knob and opening the door. To her surprise, it wasn't the Seventh Son, but his uncle who was waiting outside.

>
"Faith," the man greeted, "M-may I come in?"

>
"Sure." She shrugged with a crooked smile, "just don't be expecting room service, if you know what I mean."

>
"U-uh, no, no, of course not." He stepped inside but hovered near the door, even after it was closed. Faith almost wished she had left a pair of panties or something lying around just to see what he would do.

>
"Have you spoken to Gabriel?" Giles asked, attempting to sound casual. He couldn't hide the hopefulness in his eyes though.

>
"Yeah." She nodded, plopping back down on the bed and folding her arms behind her head, her eyes focused on the small black and white TV.

>
"And?" Giles waited expectantly.

>
"Blondie was right." She quirked an odd smirk, "Your boy's into me. Got all prickly on me at first, but he took the bait. He'll come sniffing around soon. Everything's five by five."

>
"Good." Giles sighed, relieved, "We may be able to save him yet."

>
"Whoa, hold the phone there, Tea-Time." Faith sat up quickly, "I just got the guy's attention. I didn't promise any miracles."

>
"Yes, yes, I realize that." Giles conceded, "That's not why I came over here anyway."

>
"So why DID you come over?" Faith asked, a bit suspicious. She liked the old guy well enough, but she had been betrayed by other guys she'd liked plenty of times before.

>
"I spoke to the Watcher's Council." He said gravely.

>
Uneasiness gripped Faith's heart and she twisted her hands together tensely.

>
"You didn't tell them I was here did you?" she demanded softly.

>
"No." the Watcher shook his head, "I told them I'd never heard of you before. The last time I spoke with them, they told me they would send you when you were ready. Why don't they know you are here?"

>
"The Slayer they promised you was killed three weeks ago. She was a girl named Kendra. Took on a nest outside LA and apparently zipped when she should have zagged." The Slayer inhaled deeply and released the breath in a long sigh, "So I was the next to step up. Only they wouldn't let me DO anything. Said I was too reckless and self centered. Like they even know me."

>
"So you came here." Giles deduced.

>
Faith nodded agreeably, "I figure if I kill the big bad that took out the best Slayer they've seen in a hundred years, then that goes a long way toward proving I'm ready for anything they can throw at me."

>
"I hope that's true." He whispered, "For both our sakes."

>
Another knock sounded at the door and Faith turned to Giles.

>
"You expecting someone?" she raised her eyebrows questionably as

he shook his head in negation.

>
As she rose to answer the door, it burst open and slammed back against the wall.

>
"Hi, honey," Gabriel beamed from the doorway, "I'm home!"

>
He walked inside and sneered at his uncle, evidence of a recent injection apparent in his eyes.

>
"Oh good, you have company already." The Seventh Son grinned, "I brought some friends home too, hope you don't mind."

>
Xander and Willow slipped through the doorway behind him, smiling darkly and exposing their fangs.

>
"You see, you don't need an invitation once the owner of the building is dead." Gabriel tilted his head at the corpse of the proprietor lying face-up in the hallway.

>
"You sick son of a bitch!" Faith lashed out angrily, smashing her fist into Gabriel's chest and throwing him back.

>
Xander tackled her and drove her into the TV, jamming it against her ribs and toppling it to the floor. He slammed his fist repeatedly into the Slayer's face while pressing down with his forearm across her throat.

>
"Get. Off. Me!" Faith kicked up with her legs and rolled sharply, throwing Xander's body over her head.

>
He landed roughly on his side, shattering a cheap coffee table under his legs. Faith jumped up and dove into a roll, coming up with a stake in her hand. With a lion-like snarl, Xander was on her again, clawing for her throat.

>
"Just can't take a hint, can you, Tall-Dark-and-Stupid?" Faith cracked a hard elbow into his nose and felt it crunch satisfyingly.

>
Xander locked his arms around her waist and hoisted her high into the air.

>
"I'm done with hints." He grunted, flinging her down so that her back hit the television set.

>
Pain jolted along her spine and the air was blasted out of her lungs. Groaning, she pressed her hands to her back and rolled onto her side. Xander dropped to his knees and seized her around the neck, planting his teeth against the soft skin of her throat.

>
"Good night, Slayer." He grinned, piercing her flesh.

>
Giles wrapped a length of bedsheet tightly around the end of a baseball bat and doused it with a liberal dose of whiskey. Igniting it from the candle, he lunged forward, waving the makeshift torch at Willow as she advanced to help her lover. Willow backhanded him sharply, taking him off his feet. Bouncing up with amazing tenacity, the Watcher shoved the burning end of his torch into her stomach. Willow clutched her wound, screaming, and scrambled backward, falling to the floor and rolling around to extinguish the flames.

>
Gabriel stood and wiped a smear of blood from his lip.

>
"I'm a little surprised at you, Uncle." He shook his head mirthfully, "Alone in a young Slayer's bedroom at night? What would the Council think?"

>
"They'd think I was mad for trying to reclaim a nephew who has gone beyond redemption." Giles jabbed with the fiery torch.

>
Gabriel growled and ducked back, lancing in with a fist and connecting with his uncle's chin. Giles was not so quick to rise this time and the torch fell from his grasp. The Seventh Son drove a hard kick into Giles' ribs and scooped him up by the collar. He paused to

stamp out the fallen torch before slamming his uncle against the wall with lung-jarring force.

>
Giles struggled weakly, his eyes focusing over his nephew's shoulder, "Faith . . ."

>
Gabriel followed his gaze and found Xander pinning Faith to the floor, his face buried in her neck. Dropping Giles instantly, he gripped a double handful of the vampire's leather jacket and dragged him off her.

>
"Leave her alone." Gabriel's jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed dangerously as he tossed Xander forcefully back against the wall.

>
"What the hell are you doing?" the dark-haired vampire snarled.

>
Gabriel frowned, not really sure himself.

>
"She's mine to kill." He said at last.

>
A hand shot in from the side and buried a six-inch stake in the vampire's chest. Xander's mouth worked soundlessly for an instant before his body burst into a cloud of dust.

>
Gabriel whirled, his hands raised into an attack position. Faith squared off with him, a thin stream of blood running from a shallow bite wound on her neck and a stake in her hand. Their eyes met and the two froze momentarily, caught in indecision.

>
An enraged scream rose from the other side of the room and Willow charged, tackling Faith and driving both of them through the window. Hitting the ground outside amid a shower of glass shards, the red-haired vampire locked her hands around the Slayer's throat, hatred burning in her eyes.

>
"You killed him!" she shrieked wildly, jerking violently on Faith's throat, "You killed Xander!! My Xander!"

>
Faith choked and rolled, smashing her fist into Willow's scorched midsection. The vampire hardly noticed the first punch, but the second and the third wracked her body with waves of crippling pain. Her hands lost their strength and slipped away from Faith's throat and the Slayer kicked her away.

>
Gabriel leaped through the shattered window and landed near Willow's fallen form. Gripping her arms, he pulled her to her feet.

>
"Get away from me!" she cried, shaking free of his hold, tears of rage and loss staining her cheeks, "She has to die!"

>
The Seventh Son wrapped a strong arm tightly around the weakened vampire's shoulders.

>
"Not tonight." He said, retreating and pulling her along with him.

>
Faith sat up in the grass and watched them go. Faith held his gaze as long as she could before he turned and disappeared into the darkness. She sensed something there, something deep. Giles appeared at the window and looked down at her, intrigued.

>
* * *

>
Willow knelt submissively before her Master, not seeing, not hearing anything that was being said around her. Xander was gone, scattered to the wind as no more than a thin dust. She had nothing now, nothing without him. The Slayer had killed him, but she had only gotten the chance after someone else had distracted him. Slowly, Willow turned her murderous gaze sideways to the culprit.

>
"No big deal." Gabriel explained to the Master, shrugging, unconcerned, "We can fix this."

>
"I don't need you to FIX this!" the Master leaned forward in his throne, rage burning in his eyes, "I need you to do it right the first time! I WANT THAT SLAYER DEAD!!"

>
"Don't worry about it." Gabriel grumbled, brazenly rising to his

feet without permission, "I said I'd take care of it and I will. Slayer just got a lucky shot, that's all."

>
Willow's eyes flew wide with rage and her face twisted into a hate-filled mask.

>
"Lucky shot?! Lucky shot?!" She pounced on Gabriel's back, scratching at his face and reaching for his throat with her teeth, "It's just as much your fault as hers!"

>
Gabriel snarled and flipped her over his shoulder, slamming her body into the cold, hard floor. His lip curled in anger, he stomped down on her scorched stomach and, when she tensed up in pain, smashed the heel of his boot into her chin. The red-haired vampire skidded across the floor and slumped against the wall. Weakly, she sat up, still glaring at him and holding her dislocated jaw gingerly.

>
"Touch me again and you're dust." Gabriel stabbed a warning finger at her, seething hatred in his eyes. A few long, bloody scratches marked his cheek and one side of his neck was rubbed raw.

>
The Master watched the exchange with raised eyebrows and detached amusement.

>
"Careful now, you two," he chuckled, "Or I might have to separate you."

>
Gabriel shot the old vampire a deadly glare and turned for the open doorway.

>
"I'm out of here." He spat, slamming the door behind him.

>
Willow stood up slowly, one hand hovering over the burn on her stomach and the other rotating her swelling jaw carefully.

>
The Master paid her no attention, watching the closed door, "I'm starting to get the feeling that our Seventh Son doesn't care much for the arrangements here."

>
"He let the Slayer do it. I saw it." Willow whispered, like a hurt child.

>
"Tomorrow night." The Master nodded gravely, "The two of you will go after the Slayer again. This time neither of you will return unless she's dead. And Gabriel doesn't return at all, understand?"

>
Grinning with blood-stained teeth, Willow nodded in anticipation.

>
* * *

>
Angel lifted his head and carefully watched the figure moving in the darkness. He was a creature of the night, the gloom was no impediment to his undead eyes.

>
Gabriel slumped against the wall with a stretch of rubber tubing wrapped tightly around his upper arm. Angel's keen hearing detected a small sigh from him as he withdrew an empty syringe from a vein in his arm.

>
"You're back." The vampire noted flatly.

>
"Yeah." The young man pushed off the wall stepped into a weak beam of moonlight that streamed through a small window. He was breathing hard and there was a series of scratches down one side of his face.

>
"Trouble upstairs?" Angel looked him over, noting the multiple bruises and cuts on his body.

>
"Xander's dead." Gabriel crouched in the darkness before the metal bars, hugging himself tightly and balancing on the balls of his feet.

>
"Hm. Sad day." Angel commented blandly, "You have anything to do with it?"

>
"I don't know." He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, tilting his head toward the ceiling, "He was on top of her, hurting her. I had to stop him." He sighed sharply, his green-gold eyes filled with chaotic intensity, "I didn't expect the Slayer to stake him."

>
"This could be it, Gabriel." Angel knelt forward as far as the manacles would allow, "You could take that first big step. You can join the Whitehats and destroy the Master."

>
"Is that what you would do if I set you free?" Gabriel toyed with a small metal key between his fingers.

>
"I don't know how they'd look on a vampire as a potential member, but I'd like to try." Angel's eyes followed the key unerringly as Gabriel slipped it back into his pocket.

>
"It used to be easy." The young man whispered harshly to himself, his fingers rubbing hard against the tiny pinpricks in the crook of his opposite elbow while his eyes stared holes into the darkness, "I didn't have to think. I just had to do what I was told."

>
"Free will is a big responsibility." The vampire nodded softly, "I hope you'll be able to handle it."

>
Angel frowned as the Seventh Son reached into his pocket and withdrew the syringe, filling it to capacity from a fresh vial of the black liquid. His hands trembling, he passed over his forearm, closing his eyes and jabbing the needle into his shoulder, and squeezed the drug into his bloodstream. A shudder ran through him and the tension seemed to ease from his muscles. His breath was calmer now, but still deep and a bit ragged.

>
"That isn't going to help you." Angel eyed the syringe darkly.

>
Gabriel gripped the cage and leaned his forehead against the bars, "I know. But I can't change that."

>
He climbed to his feet, slipping the key out of his pocket again and pushed the cage door open.

>
"Stand up." He muttered, his voice low and tight as he approached Angel.

>
Angel stood up, the short lengths of chain pulling straight behind him.

>
"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice filled with cautious hope.

>
"I can't live like this anymore." Gabriel jammed his eyes tightly shut and swallowed a lump of fear in his throat.

>
"You're really going to do it, aren't you?" Angel watched the young man intensely, "You're letting me go."

>
It had been so long since he had tasted freedom. Even before he had been locked up in this basement, he had kept himself a prisoner of his own guilt and self-loathing. But now he would have a chance to change that. He could turn his life toward actively helping those in need. The Whitehats would be the perfect place to start.

>
"I'm sorry, Angel." Gabriel jammed a sharpened wooden stake into the vampire's unbeating heart, "But it's just too hard."

>
Angel stared at him, gaping and unseeing, as his body disintegrated into a billow of dust. Gabriel fell back against the wall and slid slowly to the floor, his head hanging and his face twisted in anguish.

>
* * *

>
Faith tested the edge of a shining sword with her thumbnail. Satisfied, she laid it on the library table next to an assortment of stakes and bottles of holy water.

>
"A-Are you sure that this is a good idea?" Giles asked, concerned, "I mean you're still hurt from the attack at your motel. It's only been a few hours."

>
"I'll live." The dark-haired girl stuffed her weapons into a black kit bag and slung it over her shoulder, choosing to carry the sword in her hand, "This is my fight. It's not like I'm asking you to car pool."

>
Oz, Larry and Amy all looked to their leader expectantly. Faith's words were almost identical to those of the last Slayer they had known just before she marched on the Master and was killed.

>
"No, you're wrong." The englishman picked up a crossbow and cocked it, "We've been waiting all this time for a Slayer to come to our rescue, but it's about time we thought about rescuing ourselves."

>
Oz smirked proudly and stuffed a handful of stakes in his pocket, "We can take my van."

>
Smiling, Larry and Amy followed suit and gathered up weapons of their own. Faith rolled her eyes and chuckled.

>
"What are you, like my own personal Slayerettes?" she looked the four over with budding respect, "We better get going. The faster we move on them, the better our chances are of getting the drop on them."

>
As she held the door, the Whitehat team filed past her. Larry was the last to go and he paused in the hallway.

>
"So what's your plan?" he asked excitedly.

>
"Plan?" Faith's forehead wrinkled and her mouth turned up in a reckless smile as she let the door swing closed behind her, "Who said I had a plan?"

>
* * *

>
Fifteen minutes later, the group stood outside the building that had once housed the Bronze.

>
"I've been checking this place out for a couple of days now." Faith said in a low voice, "There are four entrances. Three on the main floor and one on the roof. There's a basement level, too."

>
"How do you suggest we approach this?" Giles queried a bit nervously.

>
"You three hit the side door. Make some noise." Her eyes turned to the roof, "I'm going upstairs."

>
As she reached for the fire escape, Amy stopped her with an outstretched hand.

>
"Wait," the blonde witch said, "Before you go, I have something for you." She pulled out a small, cloth bag suspended from a loop of tough cord and handed it to the Slayer, "It's a protection charm."

>
Faith accepted the gift carefully, not really sure what to do with it, "Thanks."

>
"I know it's not much, just a few blessed rocks and things," Amy reached out and slipped the cord over the taller girl's head, "but I wanted to say thanks for helping us like this. We all do."

>
Giles, Larry and Oz nodded silently in agreement.

>
Faith held the weighty bundle in her hand staring at it for a moment then let it drop and hang from her neck.

>
"Hey, s'no big." She shrugged, uncomfortable, "I'll see you guys inside."

>
With wiry strength, she quickly scaled the fire escape on her way to the roof.

>
Giles readied a deceptively powerful crossbow and nodded to his

companions, leading them in a stealthy advance to the side door. Larry and Oz stood on either side of the metal door while Amy readied a spell in her mind. Make some noise, Giles repeated the words silently, then noise you shall have. Driving forward, he smashed the heel of his shoe into the door, cracking the jamb and throwing it wide open.

>
Faith pulled herself up over the lip of the building's roof, laying her sword down on the brick for a moment. Unintentionally, she wondered whether the others would be all right. What kind of thinking is that? She frowned to herself. All her life, Faith had had only one motto, look out for number one. But since she had been called to assume the mantle of the Slayer and then arrived in Sunnydale soon after, she had found that more had become important to her.

>
These Whitehats cared for and respected each other. And it seemed they felt the same about her, she considered, fingering the small hard charm around her neck. Now, all of a sudden, their opinions of her mattered. She wanted to make them proud. A wave of hot needles washed over her body and her senses sharpened to a razor's edge.

>
"Quiet contemplation?" a rich male voice asked conversationally.

>
Faith's head snapped up as the auburn-haired young man, Giles' nephew, stood up from the cold stones, tucking an empty syringe into it's case and slipping it into his pocket.

>
"Let's just say I'm not up here for the night air," she smirked, her eyes wandering to the scattering of fresh needle marks on his arm, "And I'm thinking that neither are you. You look like shit, you know that?"

>
She was right. Gabriel's skin was flushed and his eyes were sunken and a little too wide. Dark smudges marred his eyelids and his mouth had developed a slight twitch. Long, scabbed-over scratches stretched down one side of his face. He had obviously been hitting the drug pretty hard recently.

>
"Hey, I'm not in this business to win any beauty contests." he smiled unconcerned, strolling languidly toward her and pulling out a long, curved knife. With a flick of his toe, he sent her sword sailing over the edge of the building to clatter on the street below, "I'm here to make sure that you stop breathing."

>
"Good luck." She sneered, leaping into a lightning fast roundhouse kick.

>
He reacted with blinding speed, blocking the attack with his knife arm and smashing his opposite fist into her chest. Faith flew back with the force of the blow and stumbled, holding her chest. God, what the hell was he all doped up on? It felt like he had hit her with a sledgehammer.

>
As he advanced on her, she jumped up and swept a sharp hook across his jaw, following with a powerful front kick. Gabriel's head snapped to the side and he staggered back when her foot caught him in the stomach. She kept up the assault, pounding her fists and feet into his face, his stomach, his ribs. He took the attacks stoically, watching her with amused calmness, his body seeming to absorb the punishment without harm.

>
"Don't you feel anything?" she panted, slamming an uppercut into his jaw.

>
His head flew back and he fell back a step. Suddenly, his face twisted in anguish and rage and he swiped the knife violently before him in a deadly arc. The razor edged steel sliced through the shoulder of her leather jacket and into the flesh underneath.

>
"Before you, I felt nothing." He snarled, his face suffused with rage, "Everything was silent and numb inside. Now I can't shut out the noise inside me. You've poisoned my head. It's driving me mad."

>
"You've poisoned yourself, Gabriel." She skipped back, sucking in her stomach as he sliced at her midsection with the knife, barely missing. Snapping a rusty metal bar off the fire escape, she leaped and cracked it down across his wrist.

>
"Argh!" he bellowed as the knife tumbled from his fingers and clattered across the rooftop.

>
Faith kicked for his face and he dropped into a crouch, catching her foot and driving a hard fist into the inside of her thigh. He threw her down and she rolled, clutching at her wounded leg as if trying to hold it together. The sharp pain took her breath away and she wondered briefly if he might have broken her femur.

>
"It didn't have to be this way." She told him, rising carefully to her feet. The leg would support her, but not for anything tricky, "Remember what I said to you. Your uncle misses you. You could come back with him. With us."

>
She backed away slowly, stopping when the rear edge of her boot scraped up against the black-painted glass pane of a rectangular skylight.

>
Gabriel shook his head and stared at her with intense, tortured eyes.

>
"It's too late. I've come too far." His fingers flexed and he swallowed hard, fixing her with a steady glare, "There's only one way to silence the screaming in my heart now."

>
Diving forward, he tackled her, throwing both of them onto the skylight and shattering it. They dropped endlessly, locked in a deadly embrace and surrounded by a cloud of sharp, glinting shards of glass.

>
The two landed on a large, double bed with bone-jarring force. Faith bounced and hit the floor on her back, her feet caught in a tangle of black sheets. Gabriel clambered to lean over the edge of the bed, his face bleeding from a number of shallow wounds, and smashed a hard fist into her forehead. Faith's head snapped back and, jerking her lower body, she dragged the sheets out from under him, spilling him to the floor in a heap. The knife tumbled to the hard tiles with a dull clatter.

>
They matched gazes for an instant, looking to the weapon and then to one another. At once, they each dove for the blade, stretching and reaching. Slayer and Seventh Son clawed at one another, dragging themselves across the floor.

>
"Stay down, damn it!" Gabriel growled, slapping the back of his hand across her face and grabbing up the knife.

>
"I don't go down." She rammed her knee into his side and tried to squirm out from under him.

>
His eyes filled with wild green fire, Gabriel pinned her to the floor with one hand and raised the knife high into the air, "You will tonight."

>
He stabbed the knife downward savagely and Faith jammed her eyes shut in fear as she felt the impact of it hitting her chest straight through to her spine. The high pitched clang of it hurt her ears. High pitched clang? She cracked her eyes open and glanced down. The tip of the knife had connected solidly with the charm that Amy had given her, jamming itself into one of the hard rocks inside the tightly bound package.

>
Gabriel just realized that she was not dead as she jammed the knuckle of her thumb into his throat and knocked the knife out of his hand. As he choked, she made a desperate lunge for the weapon.

>
He dove after her and she snatched up the knife, rolling as she hit the floor and driving upward with the blade. Already airborne, Gabriel could do nothing to avoid it. The knife handle ground against Faith's hip as he landed full-force on top of her and the blade sank deep into his stomach.

>
The Seventh Son's eyes went wide and a small gasp of air was forced from his throat, his entire body rigid in shock. His jaw clenched against an eruption of blood in the back of his throat and he collapsed onto his side, cradling the fatal wound.

>
Faith staggered to her feet and pushed her hair out of her face, looking down at him. He looked like a hurt animal curled up on the floor and dying like that. His breath came in short, rapid gasps and tears welled in his eyes. God, she thought with a pang of sympathy, he's just a kid inside.

>
"I was too weak." He whispered, crimson froth on his lips, as he rolled slowly over onto his back and stared blindly at the ceiling, ". . .too . . .weak . . ."

>
Faith knelt next to him as his last breath eased out of him in a long, tired sigh. Shaking her head sadly, she pushed his eyelids closed and caught sight of a small object pinned to the floor under his corpse. Picking it up, she examined it and smiled bitterly. Tonight, the Master would learn the meaning of poetic justice.

>
* * *

>
The Master nimbly ducked the arrow from Giles' crossbow and punched Oz in the chest, throwing him to the floor. Willow was on the young Whitehat in an instant, straddling his waist and dropping a double-fisted chop onto his sternum. Oz gasped and felt the air whoosh painfully out of his lungs. The vampire gripped him by the chin and turned his head forcefully to the side, exposing his throat.

>
"You wanna be my new boyfriend?" she inquired sweetly, pressing her teeth against his throat, "I've recently become available, thanks to that whore of a Slayer."

>
"Creature of unlife, sleep the sleep of death!" Amy shouted, flinging a handful of herbs over the pair.

>
Willow hissed angrily and slashed her talons across Oz's face, leaping away from him, directly for Amy.

>
"It's not working!" the girl shrieked as the vampire bore her to the ground and knocked the spell casting components out of her hands.

>
Willow leaned down and pressed her cheek to the frightened girl's ear.

>
"How about you? Do YOU wanna be my new boyfriend?" she leered, evilly.

>
Amy saw the vampire's eyes go wide and her body jerked once before it dissolved into a column of ash. Coughing, she sat up and found Oz standing over her with a stake in his hand and blood running from four deep claw marks running diagonally down across his face. He smiled through the pain, reaching out with one hand and pulling her to her feet.

>
Giles lined up another shot at the Master with his crossbow while Larry held a group of three other vampires at bay with a blazing torch and a cross. Giles took his shot and the Master pulled a nearby minion into the path of the streaking projectile, saving himself, but dooming the young vampire.

>
"Where is your Slayer, Whitehat?" the bat-faced vampire laughed cruelly as the vampire Giles had hit burst into dust, "Is she too afraid to face me?"

>
A heavy weight hit him from above as Faith launched herself from the metal stairs and landed on his back, locking her arm around his throat.

>
"With a face as ugly as yours, I'd rather come from behind." She quipped harshly, jamming a syringe into his neck and driving the plunger all the way down as he struggled to get her off him.

>
Cracking an elbow into her ribs, the Master backed hard against the wall and spun away as she sank to the floor.

>
"What the hell were you trying to do?!" the aged vampire demanded in outrage, pulling the syringe out of his flesh and holding the side of his neck.

>
Faith shifted painfully and sat up, a grim smirk of triumph bending her lips.

>
"That's no flu shot I just gave you there, Bat-face." She raised her eyebrows and brandished a bottle of holy water tauntingly, "One hundred percent H2O with a kick. Consider it a taste of your own medicine."

>
The Master's face filled with panic as he felt the intense burning inside him.

>
"No!" he wailed as gray ash spread out across his body from a point on his neck, "The prophecy! It can't be! I killed the Slayer! I killed her!"

>
He screamed in denial as his flesh disintegrated, leaving behind only a fanged, ivory skeleton and an empty syringe to clatter to the floor.

>
Faith staggered to her feet and looked down at the Master's remains.

>
"You may have killed A Slayer." She smirked, "But not THE Slayer."

>
* * *

>
Faith leaned back in her chair, propping her feet up on Giles' desk. The librarian waved his arms, shooing her off fussily. With a crooked smirk, she rose and sauntered over to another chair and sat down.

>
Larry peered out the library window at the scattering of students in the courtyard. In the past few weeks since the destruction of the Master, the vampire population had dropped off considerably, thanks in no small part to the efforts of Faith and her new companions. He smiled as he noted a few bright colors scattered amongst the boring browns and tired grays of his fellow students' attire. Sunnydale was slowly becoming the semblance of a normal town.

>
Amy paced back and forth tensely near the library doors. Oz was due back from the hospital soon, the bandages on his face having been taken off that morning and the stitches finally removed. After the ordeal at the Master's lair, the two of them had started to become very close. She was more than a little anxious to see the results of the day's procedure.

>
The young man entered with his usual pleasant reserve and she threw her arms around his neck in a caring hug.

>
"So how do I look?" he asked tilting his head and indicating the long, pink lines on his face.

>
Amy released him and smiled softly, drawing her fingers tenderly along the scars, "You look . . .very distinguished."

>
"Yeah, I bet GQ is just gonna be pounding down your door." Faith snickered, rising up out of her chair and heading for the door, "Well, now that that little revelation is done with, I'm going to head back to my motel, catch some shut-eye." She waved briefly to the group, "I'll see you all on patrol tonight. Bye."

>
Oz and Amy followed her out the door, intent on a little quiet time together before dark. Larry leaned away from the window and sighed happily.
>
"It all turned out okay, huh?" he smiled at his mentor.

>
"Hm? Whu?" Giles blinked confusedly, snapping back from staring dazedly at the softly swinging doors.
>
"You know, Oz's face is alright, Faith's finally acting like we're a team and the whole town is starting to look alive again. It's like everything's been redeemed."
>
Noticing the distant look in Giles' eyes, Larry leaned over the desk and snapped his fingers in front of the librarian's eyes a few times, "Hey! Giles! You listening?"
>
"Uh? What? Oh, yes Larry, quite." Giles stumbled, "W-What . . . was it you were saying?"
>
"Never mind, Chief. I'll let you get your rest." Larry patted him on the back and walked over to the door, "It wasn't anything important. I was just saying how everything's been redeemed."

>
The bulky young man left the library, whistling a happy tune. Giles watched the doors blankly again until they stopped swinging.

>
"Not everything, Larry." He whispered sadly, withdrawing a broken, empty syringe out of his desk drawer and staring at it, "Not everything."

>

>

>
AUTHOR'S NOTE

>
For those of you who may be interested in the rest of the series and/or may have missed a piece or two of it, below is a list of the stories with short descriptions.

>

>
DIVERGENT PATHS - Coinciding with the discovery of an artifact with the power to close the Hellmouth, a mysterious stranger arrives in Sunnydale with abilities that rival the Slayer's. Will he be a powerful ally for her, or bring about her downfall?

>
TO HELL WITH TOMORROW - Thirty-five years into the future and Slaying has taken on a whole new scope. Gabriel Giles attempts to cheat death and learns that things happen for a reason.

>
BAD BLOOD - A familiar face comes to LA, forcing Angel to confront both a violent killer and his lingering feelings for Buffy.

>
RETURNS - Spike and Drusilla return to Sunnydale over the summer, but they aren't the only familiar faces turning up. Planning to steal the powers of the Slayer and Seventh Son, they cast a dark shadow over the reuniting Chosen Ones.

>
POOR MISS EDITH - Before coming to Sunnydale, Spike and Drusilla lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia and battled with a young Gabriel Giles.

>
REDEEMED - Five months after 'The Wish', a new Slayer arrives in Sunnydale to aid the Whitehats and faces off with a very different Seventh Son.

>
BOY'S NIGHT OUT - While the girls have a night to themselves, the boys go looking for fun and run afoul of a demon with a taste for young men.

>
HISTORY - Threatened by the possible return of the Master, Buffy is forced into a hard choice between love and duty.

>
FACING FEARS - Buffy's been dumped and three different men plan to take advantage, Riley, Parker and the newly-reborn Master. Meanwhile, Gabriel is targeted by the Initiative.

>
A DAY IN THE LIFE - When Buffy and Gabriel get turned into children, Willow and Xander must assume the roles of Slayer and Seventh Son. But which is the greater problem, Sunnydale's vampire population or two rambunctious toddlers on the loose?
> <p><p>

End
file.